

# New England Transcendentalism versus Virulent Nationalism: The Evolution of Charles Ives' Patriotic March Music<sup>1</sup>

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To understand the origins of Charles Ives' music and the creative processes involved in its evolution, one must first discard the usual distinction between program and abstract or "pure" music. Ives (1874-1954) neither merely records a narrative or scene with sounds, nor solely develops his music out of the mathematics of note structures and designs. In fact, the essence of his musical thought and experience represents a synthesis of these two approaches.<sup>2</sup>

This synthesis is evident in his growing up imprinted with both his father, George's, abstract sound experiments and the elder Ives' enthusiastic involvement and promotion of the various musical experiences of the New England town. Ives inherited a total acceptance of even the most apparently unmusical details.<sup>3</sup> As he absorbed a more

1. While this essay results primarily from a decades-long fascination with Ives' musical development, it is greatly improved as a result of the well-informed and insightful reading it received from Dale Carter of the University of Aarhus, Denmark. The flaws that remain are, of course, the author's.

2. See Charles E. Ives, *Essays Before a Sonata, The Majority, and Other Writings*, Howard Boatwright, ed., (New York, 1962), 3-6, for a statement of the composer's belief that program and abstract music are in practice indistinguishable.

3. The first four chapters of Stuart Feder, *"My Father's Song": A Psychoanalytic Biography* (New Haven, 1992) amply demonstrate George Ives' multifaceted leadership and advocacy of the musical life of Danbury.

general New England cultural inheritance in his schooling locally and at Yale University, the paternal approach to music was solidified by the individualism and transcendentalism of the region's great literary flowering in the nineteenth-century. Above all, his interpretation of Ralph Waldo Emerson's essays and poetry colored his compositions and melded with his use of the music he knew from his hometown.<sup>4</sup> In short, these two influences came to mean that all things hold a divine spark, that by nature's (God's) plan the spark and the thing are fused, and that the thing – view, sound, activity, feeling, or experience – leads to an awareness of the spark of divine light within it. Again and again, Ives justified his musical usages and refuted Rollo's rules by referring to the endless variety of God's nature.<sup>5</sup>

So, often Ives uses discoveries from his or his father's abstract experiments with sound to express a programmatic element. One of the best-known of these is his father's device of having two village bands march around the town square playing different tunes. Father and son listened to the changing sound intensities, the proportionate weight of the approaching and retreating sound masses, the interplay of melody lines and keys and tempi. It was great fun to the boy and fertile ground for the composer. The scene in the square that seemed comic or worse to other hearers was not alien to the boy; before the 1880s and in the immediate years afterward, his father had mixed keys and melodies and he himself had toyed with dissonances and seen his father's acceptance of "out-of-tune" singers and out-of-step marchers.

In his *Memos* Ives describes how at neighbors' requests he practiced

Connecticut; the paternal Ives' musical tastes and experiments; and the degree to which his son embraced these aspects of his childhood experience.

4. Peter Burkholder, in *Charles Ives: The Ideas and the Music* (New Haven, 1985) advocates the recent revisionist view that the composer read Emersonian philosophy (and other Transcendentalist ideas and attitudes) into his compositions after their completion, most clearly in his *Essays Before a Sonata* (1920). Some "Ivesean revisionists" attribute the composer's allegedly later explication of his work through New England literary classics as a result of his re-reading of Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne. Others – for example, Stuart Feder – argue for a biographical revisionism and assert that such factors as his wife's great affection for these writers led Ives to return to them and to interpret his own work in their terms. This essay asserts the likelihood of a more general cultural influence, that core ideas and attitudes of the Transcendentalists had entered the mainstream of Anglo-American culture by his childhood and that therefore, the revisionists' point is moot and of lesser importance than the central importance of that cultural legacy.

5. This and the next two paragraphs build on Charles E. Ives, *Charles E. Ives: Memos* (New York, 1972), John Kirkpatrick, ed., 2-7.

the drum part for his father's band on the piano to lessen the noise. Over a period of time and at his father's questioning he "would make some effort to find out what was going on, with some reason."<sup>6</sup> He discovered that "triads and chords without bites," combinations in a definite key, did not sound appropriate. He developed different patterns for each hand and suitable chords for accents. At school orchestra practice and with the town band he honed these developments until they "didn't seem to bother the other players."<sup>7</sup> Clearly, the boy was long familiar with these "new" sounds – already so much at home with atonality that chords and triads in a key seemed to have no "bite." Often in later life he repeated the experience of "stretching" the ears to accept unorthodox sound combinations and consequently, of finding that the usual "musical" sounds had become tame or even unpleasantly pretty.<sup>8</sup>

In his very first march, "Holiday Quicltstep" (1887), the boy puts two bands together in the sense that Reeve's "Second Regiment Connecticut National Guard March" is mingled with and layered over the key and chord texture of his own composition. His "March II" (1892) is fused with "Son of a Gambolier," and his "March III" (1893) incorporates "My Old Kentucky Home." In his notes for the Vanguard recordings of Ives' symphonies Harold Farberman describes the maturation of this technique as it appears in the *Fourth Symphony* (1896-1923):

Because of Ives' desire to recreate, musically, past experiences, we are faced with several pages of problematical music, to say the least .... It is this music which I call, for want of a better description, COMBINATORIAL SEGMENTS. A COMBINATORIAL SEGMENT is a direct transfer into a musical complex—a simultaneity—of a previously experienced musical happening. This is not an instance of using polythematic or polyrhythmic procedures, for they are not operative in these particular sections of the score.<sup>9</sup>

6. Ives, *Memos*, p. 5. The quotation comes from Vivian Perlis, *Charles Ives Remembered: An Oral History* (New Haven, 1974), 17.

7. For the quotations, see Perlis, *Ives Remembered*, 18-19.

8. Peter Burkholder's "Ives and the Four Musical Traditions," pages 3-34 in *Ives and His World* (Princeton, 1996) edited by Burkholder, ably explores the composer's assimilation and later mingling of American popular secular music (including marches), American Protestant hymnody and liturgical music, European classical "art" music, and his own experimental music. Burkholder, however, continues to see Ives as an "accomplished actor ... [who] cast himself as a Beethoven disciple ... [or] recast himself ... as a radical experimenter," becoming "in some measure both, as he was in part all the roles he had played, when he chose to play them." (21) This view deprives Ives and his music of sincerity and authenticity by reducing him and his works too much to posing or skillful and opportunistic borrowing.

9. The capital letters are Faberman's.

One of these "past experiences" was the hearing of two bands marching around the town square playing different tunes. Another was the prolonged experience of investigating unorthodox combinations which allowed his ear to assimilate the "clash" of the two bands. His first marches contained not only quotations but also memories. And those memories partook of what was the idea of march and the idea of fun to the boy.

In adulthood, marvelously, the boy's fun remains alive and present tense. In the later music, however, the fusion of idea – Emersonian spark – and concrete experience is self-consciously used. The link (perhaps a better word is "catalyst") between the two is the sincerity, the aliveness, that makes one see the "soul shining out." Ives remarked this of a woman enthusiastically singing in church and also commented that the camp-meeting singers' "great waves of sound" were created by "thousands of 'let-out' souls."<sup>10</sup> This kind of spiritualized reality was what he was getting at when he scored a hymn setting with all the overtones and undertones of an inaccurate but inspired congregation of singers.<sup>11</sup>

Even this link, perhaps, was suggested by his father's views. In later life Ives liked to repeat an anecdote about George's response to complaints over a bass singer's terrible off-key voice.

Once when Father was asked: "How can you stand it to hear old John Bell (who was the best stonemason in town) bellow off key the way he does at camp-meetings?" His answer was "Old John is a supreme musician. Look into his face and hear the music of the ages. Don't pay attention to the sounds. If you do you may miss the music. You won't get a heroic ride to Heaven on pretty little sounds!"<sup>12</sup>

10. Ives, *Memos*, 22.

11. The hymns mingled in *America*, *General William Booth Enters into Heaven*, *The Celestial Country*, and, perhaps most effectively, in the third movement ("From Hanover Square") of the *Second Orchestral Set* exemplify this rendition of the reality of congregational singing. See Jan Swafford, *Charles Ives: A Life in Music* (New York, 1996), 269-271, for a sensitive discussion of these pieces and Ives' striving after techniques that would express religious spirituality he experienced and observed on occasion in the people around him.

12. John Kirkpatrick recalls Ives' retelling of this anecdote in the interview recorded on Record V (Bonus Disc) of Columbia Records' *Charles Ives: The 100th Anniversary* (New York, 1974). Kirkpatrick's version of the story was transcribed from the recording by the author. The view that Ives' entire musical production is a memorial to George Ives and an attempt to perpetuate his relationship with his father is advanced in the Stuart Feder biography mentioned in note 2. While Feder overstates his case and neglects other influences on Ives' work, the biography provides fine documentation of the father-son musical relationship that meant so much to the composer.

From the beginning, the character of a thing – salvation in general or in specifically religious terms – and good music were not to be fragmented if life was to be alive with "substance" rather than dead with the going-through-the-motions of form or rules.<sup>13</sup>

In Vivian Perlis' *Charles Ives Remembered: An Oral History*, Bernard Herrmann comments that the "Washington's Birthday" movement of *New England Holidays* (1909) is a "photographic replica." Once, during a particular winter, Ives told him, church bells seemed to have a beautiful sound like sleigh bells. Herrmann, therefore, always uses sleigh bells for the piece since he believes Ives meant that *one* time rather than a representation typical of life during all New England winters.<sup>14</sup> Concerning the bells, this may be true. Yet Herrmann's observation stops short of the fact that, in Ives' creative imagination and transcendental outlook, one single moment, day, or experience could become imbued with the life of all such times. In Ives' music the individual comes to be universal by its transcendental intensity rather than by a conscious attempt to collate telling features into an archetype.

"The Second Connecticut Regiment National Guard March" and the other marches reappear as they come to mean more to the maturing composer. They are combined with "Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean," "America," "Yankee Doodle," and other patriotic songs. They are changed in time and key and cloaked in a concatenation of disjointed march pieces in "Country Band" (1903-4), one of the most nearly programmatic of Ives' works because he said it attempts to show the way things really happened in such a band. Yet, in that piece the march-style tempi, running trombone parts, flute flourishes, and drum cadences are for the first time disassociated from their origins and used with a variety of popular tunes and traditional nursery songs including "London Bridge is Falling Down."

Later yet, in 1909, the "Connecticut March" first appears in part of *Three Places in New England* as the "Putnam's Camp" movement and then reappears as a significant structural element in *Decoration Day* (1912). Again, the march tunes and more general march idioms are associated with patriotic holidays and national songs. The technical

13. *Charles E. Ives: Memos* (New York, 1972), John Kirkpatrick, ed., 2-7.

14. Perlis, *Ives Remembered*, 87.

mastery and experimentation increase as the composer adapts to new subjects. In Decoration Day the march idioms and tunes are built into pyramidal levels which then mount to exploding clouds of fireworks in the Fourth of July music. Commenting on the last piece in the *Memos*, Ives explicitly expresses his disdain for the categorization of musical compositions into a two-level hierarchy of abstract and program works. "This is pure program music which is also pure abstract music. 'You pays your money and you takes your choice,'" he remarks. In these pieces what first may have been experienced as an incandescent boyhood marching experience or as a sound experiment in the square becomes interwoven into the larger texture of Ives' imaginative New England and America.

In the technical complexity of its structure and the richness of its thematic background, the Fourth Symphony represents in many ways the last, fullest, and most original development of Ives' music. In one sense this fact is no surprise for the composer said, "not until I got to work on the Fourth Symphony did I feel justified in writing quite as I wanted to, when the subject matter was religious." Although there is much thematic material directly derived from New England hymns in the symphony, all the elements in it are religious in the broader sense of dealing with, as Ives said, "the searching questions of What? and Why? which the spirit of man asks of life."<sup>15</sup>

The march music in the symphony is used in as transformed a way as the hymns. The marches and patriotic tunes in fact are a final evolutionary form from those first march compositions. At first glance the increased technical complexity of polyrhythm and polythème is most apparent. As Henry Cowell notes,

... It is true that it (the complexity of rhythm in Ives' music) is in some spots probably more involved than that to be found in any other written music. Thinking to find an illustration, I opened the score to the last movement of the *Fourth Symphony* at random, and I immediately came upon a measure, the first on page twenty-four, which, nominally in 3/2 meter, proves to have twenty-four different simultaneous rhythmic figures, with four, five and six notes of equal value filling the measure in different voices, the rest of the figure being made up of notes of unequal value.<sup>16</sup>

15. Ives' remarks are quoted in the program notes to Columbia Records' *Charles Ives: The 100th Anniversary*.

16. From the program notes to the Columbia Records recording of the *Fourth Symphony*, 1965.

Not two march tunes but a multitude makes a block of sound or, as Ives described it, a "cloud."<sup>17</sup> The ultimate "combinatorial segment" in Ives is a paradigm of related musical memory-experiences that come to represent a way of life or attitude about life. The life view is given the spatial dimensions of an environment by employing developments on another of his father's experiments. As the elder Ives had placed separate bands in various parts of the town center, each playing its separate variation of a song, so his son here directs that both an on- and another off-stage orchestra, an off-stage solo piano, two on-stage pianos, an off-stage chorus, and an off-stage percussion section be used. Because some notes and tunes are sounded at a distance, the listener must pay extremely close attention to recognize some of the familiar tunes in the melody complex. For Ives has designed them to act, not separately, but as part of the whole, which, while it is intended to stir old associations for the auditor, is meant primarily to indicate the composer's attitude toward the character of the life-view it represents.<sup>18</sup> Thus, for instance, dissonances, clashing rhythms, and cancelling fortissimo dynamic markings abound in the fourth and second movements of the symphony where Ives is dealing with opposed value systems.<sup>19</sup>

The substance of the second (or "Comedy") movement was first composed for the now lost *Hawthorne Piano Concerto* (1911-1913). Later, Ives took part of the concerto score and redesigned it for the "Hawthorne" movement of the *Concord Sonata* (1911-1916). In the sonata Ives was "taking off the supernatural, the phantasmal, the mystical" that he found in Hawthorne's work. He was not dealing with the "fundamental part of Hawthorne" that "must have for its basic theme something that has to do with the influence of sin on the conscience."<sup>20</sup> The concerto dealt with that fundamental moral theme. By developing the more serious side of the concerto movement and rescoring it into the

17. Perlis, *Ives Remembered*, 123.

18. *loc. cit.* In fact, Ives' use of multiple blocks of sound to create a sound "environment" approached an even more literal approximation (and grander setting) of the open-air experiments and memories he shared with his father in the *Universe Symphony*, for which he planned a performance executed by choruses and orchestras on neighboring hillsides.

19. A similar structure is apparent in Ives' *Second String Quartet*, where the second movement's musical "discussions," approximating opposed views, are expressed through musical elements that are consciously designed to violate the listener's sense of order and harmony.

20. Ives, *Essays Before a Sonata*, 39-42, 246. The quoted material is located on pages 39 and 41.

symphony, Ives deals fittingly with the metaphysical questions he probes in the symphony as a whole.

Actually, Hawthorne's story "The Celestial Railroad" may be viewed as the starting point and the vehicle for the meaning of the second movement. The story started as at least a partial program for the movement and in the end provided a literary parallel to the critique of the contemporary scene Ives wanted to express. In his use of the story Ives needed only fragmentary elements that fired his thinking processes. He used similarly small fragments when he wrote music generated from stimuli in Untermeyer's poem "The Swimmers," Kipling's "Sick Eagle," and Milton's "Evening."

Hawthorne's dream allegory is a sequel to John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. In this up-dated version the Devil's ministers and sinners have constructed a railroad from Hell to Heaven to make salvation appear easy. Mechanization, creature comforts, and materialism combine to form the new false value system which the new Pilgrim does not recognize as damning until it seems too late. There are also old-fashioned pilgrims who foot it towards Heaven through toils, tribulations, and the jeers of the ungodly. At the story's end two of the old-fashioned pilgrims make it to the celestial hosts, the new pilgrim realizes he has been deceived as the infernal steam ferry seems ready to explode and he is splashed with deadly cold water, and the narrator wakes suddenly from his nightmare.

The Fourth Symphony's second movement presents the sinful easy life of the "Celestial Railroad" much more powerfully than it shows the "illusive fantastic" of the sonata.<sup>21</sup> To be sure, the atmospheric fantasy setting is there, but now it seems to picture "that region of the earth in which lies the famous City of Destruction" – as Hawthorne describes Hell in his story's first sentence. The strings vaguely define a vast emptiness in eerie high half-tones. The pianos dot the space with disjointed notes dropped like water in the distant darkness. The oboe intones sad atonal phrases. Like low-pitched moans, the cellos "slide" in minor keys. A sudden jangling brass fanfare announces the appearance of the Devil's hellish railroad train, which distantly rumbles low on the bass register keys of the piano and then grindingly grows higher and closer in

21. *loc. cit.*



volume and pitch, accelerating to a noisy brass and percussion climax complete with flute train whistle.

All this atmospheric evocation, especially the train, is breath-takingly accurate as program music. Yet the combinatorial segment that expresses the train's climactic arrival is composed of those early, very American, Ivesean marches concocted together with "The Red, White, and Blue," "Yankee Doodle," "Tramp, Tramp, Tramp," and "Camptown Races" – among others. And the main melodic line of the infernal train's progress somehow seems to be a distorted parody of "Our Boys Will Shine Tonight," the song American spectators traditionally sing at football matches to rally hometown spirit. Here is the strangely reversed direction of the path Ives marked out in his use of the material that had inspired the carefree, innocent musical fun of his childhood.

A heretofore unstated premise of this study is that Ives' music is an intensely personal reaction to his historical environment. Before the end of World War I he was becoming disillusioned with the way the purpose of the war seemed lost. A virulent nationalism was destroying Wilson's ideals of global cooperation and peace, which Ives avidly supported. When speaking of the Fourth Symphony in the *Memos*, Ives remembers how the anti-German feelings in America made his copyist Greinert unable to work on the score. Ives acidly and sadly comments,

(... This is just another sad but unnecessary result of the old medieval idea of nationalism. The only thing it does today is to make war. It is fostered and encouraged by the few – the government politicians and not the people – and it's about time we stop it.)<sup>22</sup>

Once, years before in Danbury, Connecticut, nationalism was an amateurish and exuberant local pride, respectful reverence for forefathers, and an occasion for a boy's happy times on holidays. Today "the only thing it does ... is to make war."

The music in the second movement reflects the lost purpose, the distorted national pride, the greed, and the same, perhaps naive, self-deceit that Hawthorne satirized in his story. However, Ives gives the allegory a new application to the changing times he knew and to the apparent loss of general belief in the ideals he held dear. The train of

22. Ives, *Memos*, 136

nationalism charges on through darkness on a misdirected course. The strains of well known American melodies that traditionally express patriotism and local boosterism accompany the train's arrival and, musically speaking, trample on each other in a jarring, a-rhythmical, dissonant cacophony. Here again is the fusion of abstract and program music that Ives achieves in the most intensely felt climaxes of his work. In this movement, however, deep anger and disillusion over America's perceived loss of integrity and apparently diseased nationalism leads him to express a pained noisy inversion of his earlier celebration of small-town marching bands.

The symphony goes on to the third movement's double fugue of "From Greenland's Icy Mountains" and "All Hail the Power," two hymns which Ives had developed as musical concepts for as long as he had evolved the secular concepts already discussed. "And crown Him Lord of All" is more clearly stated than any other phrase from the hymns. The fugue is in C Major. There is no atonality here. The melodic and rhythmic materials are uncomplicated. The melodies are uncovered and unthreatened by the fantastic forces that repeatedly crowded and canceled them out in the preceding movement. Near the end Ives added to the hymns a segment from Handel's "Joy to the World." In the third movement's wonderfully calm peace of mind and hope in transcendental values is Ives' suggested alternative to the frenzied activity of the second movement—and the virulent nationalism it deplores.